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ABSTRACT

Since it was believed that proper instruction in basic grammar skills requires systematic treatment, a separate elective course in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary was added to the curriculum at Wichita State University. Students enrolled in beginning composition courses receive a diagnostic language skills examination, with those scoring below the 39th percentile being encouraged to enroll in English 011 that semester. Most of the 30 to 40 students in English 011 each semester have not taken the composition course, however. Three programmed texts are used in the course, which is offered on a credit or noncredit basis. Student response to English 011 has been almost entirely favorable, although some students have expressed a need for more individualized instruction. Although the present focus of the course is on sentence structure, efforts to teach within the context of the composing process will add purpose to the units on spelling and vocabulary. Since English 011 requires no former study or knowledge, it constitutes a bridge between the general public and the world of the university. (JF)

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AN ADJUNCT COURSE FOR ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Composition programs grow in response to increases in enrollment; more sections are added, that is, to "accomodate the influx. But the development of a comp program is a separate process that may or may not accompany an increase in the number of students to be served. By development, we generally meant the diversification of courses to meet varied needs. A program develops as it responds to a number of pressures, including the drive of individual faculty members toward specialization, the constant attempts by administrators to expand the curriculum, and the desires of the community for instruction ranging from training in the basic skills to "advanced composition." Such was the general context of our decision at Wichita State University to add a separate elective course in grammar, spelling and vocabulary--the adjunct skills course we called "English 011."

A more immediate reason for adding the course was that some students in the remedial composition sections needed extensive instruction in traditional grammar--something we had a hard time fitting in, given our primary responsibility for teaching paragraph development, description, comparision, analysis and so on. Furthermore, we felt that proper instruction in basic grammar skills required systematic treatment, rather than the occasional unit on comma splices or dangling participles. As an experiment, then, we decided to split off the "grammar" part of the remedial comp course and combine it with instruction in spelling and vocabulary, language skills training which would enhance the grammar study.

CS204247

The first section of English 011 was offered Monday and Wednesday at 12:30 - 1:20, an hour when the majority of students are on campus but are less likely to have scheduled another class. The final grade would be Credit/Non-Credit (Credit = an average of 70% or better on all tests, plus all written work completed). The two credits earned in the course would count toward the total number of hours needed for the B.A.; they would not satisfy part of the composition requirement, however, since those who had taken English 011 would still have to take the basic 101 - 102 comp sequence, and that would mean, in effect, an excessive 3-course comp requirement. Actually, most students were happy with the C/NC plan, although a few who earned A's made arrangements for the letter grade to appear on their transcripts.

Enrollment in English 011 was open to any student at the university, but we hoped students would take it concurrently with the beginning composition course. At the beginning of the semester, we administered a diagnostic language skills examination (available free of charge from Prentice-Hall, Inc.) to all students in the beginning comp sections, and strongly encouraged those who scored below the 39th percentile to add English 011 that same semester. Those scoring between the 39th and 55th percentiles were also advised to take the course. In practice, however, most of the thirty to forty students in English 011 each semester have not been taking a composition course. Rather, they are freshmen or sophomores looking for training that will help them do better in English than they did in high school or in their first college comp course. The class generally includes a few foreign students, as well as people who have been out of school for some time, and one or two (usually secretaries)

who want to brush up on grammar and spelling for professional purposes.

Because this was to be a practical, skills-oriented course, we decided to make programmed textbooks the backbone of the curriculum. These texts offered several advantages. First, even the slowest students would have little trouble understanding the material, since it would be reduced to a series of brief "frames," or questions, building gradually toward fully developed concepts such as "the complete sentence," or "subordination." Also, since each frame is followed by the correct answer, students can easily determine whether or not they have learned the material. This objectivity in turn makes it easier to complete each assignment within a relatively fixed amount of time. A student trying to fit English 011 into an already tight schedule would be more likely to keep up with the class, and would also have the general advantage of being more independent of the teacher. (If such independence sounds like a dubious benefit, remember that a basic objective of skills courses is to encourage the kind of independent study that will continue after the course is over).

Accordingly, we assigned three programmed texts as the instructional base for English 011. The grammar text was Joseph E. Blumenthal's English 3200, 2nd ed. (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), which we used to create the basic organization of the course, assigning a limited number of frames for each class and giving regular tests from the exam booklet that comes with the text. As a back-up text, we adopted Lee A. Jacobus, The Sentence Book (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), which illustrated the grammar concepts developed in the Blumenthal and provided numerous written exercises that would help reinforce the programmed material. Our spelling

text was James I. Brown and Thomas E. Pearsall, Better Spelling (D. C. Heath), a practical, semi-programmed book that analyzed 13 of the most common spelling problems (e.g. when to double the final consonant before adding an ending: forget + t + ing). For vocabulary, we chose James Cronin's Vocabulary 1500 (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), also a programmed text, which gave the orginal meanings of the standard prefixes, roots and suffixes in English and demonstrated their usefulness for developing one's vocabulary.

The role of the teacher in this course--in addition to planning the assignments and making sure they were completed--was mainly to reinforce what the students had learned from the texts by going over the material in class, giving frequent objective tests, and then reviewing the material which the students had found difficult. One way to reinforce the programmed grammar was to review in class the frames presenting key concepts (e.g. the paradigm for a compound sentence), using the blackboard and dittoed handouts to provide concrete examples that students could take away with them. Another review strategy was to give parallel assignments in the Jacobus text, which we found quite useful as an overview of the material presented frame by frame in the Blumenthal. Finally, since the Blumenthal test booklet contained two analogous tests for each unit, we used one test for reviewing the material and the other for the exam itself, letting the class study the exam sheet during the day or so beforehand; if indeed the students worked up the answers and memorized them before the test, we considered that a valid part of the learning process. All tests were graded in class to provide immediate feedback. For students who did poorly, we designed a system of make-up tests. Blumenthal's publisher provides the teacher with a separate

booklet of alternate tests (again, two for each unit), and we placed several copies of each one at the campus testing center (hours 9 - 5, Mon. - Fri.) so that any student could take as many as two make-ups. If a large percentage of the students failed a test, we held a review session and then gave a make-up in class.

Our methods for teaching the spelling and vocabulary texts were slightly different. We found we could teach a spelling unit in about half an hour if we reviewed the key concepts, then gave a brief test and graded it in class. We normally gave one spelling test per week. Administering vocabulary tests was more difficult. We tried having the students use each word in a sentence, but the sentences were often ambiguous or of doubtful clarity. We compromised by giving regular assignments in the programmed text and making sure the work was done by checking each student's textbook every week or so during the latter part of class (the same method was used for checking the written assignments in the Jacobus text). We also devoted class time to discussing vocabulary, spending a half hour on it during every other class.

Student response to English 011 has been almost entirely favorable, although students have pointed out some ways in which the course might be improved. The best feature, in their opinion, was the use of programmed texts, and especially the Blumenthal English 3200. For some of them, this was the first grammar book they had been able to read with any understanding at all; most of them said the programmed format made it easier to plan their work. Another thing they liked, to our surprise, was the spelling tests. One reason seemed to be that "spelling" was a link with their former schooling; spelling

tests are short, objective and relatively undemanding--a familiar routine with practical results, perhaps, in terms of increased spelling ability. In general, students also responded favorably to our attempts to make learning the objective, rather than grades. They liked knowing that if the teacher could help it, no one would fall behind or leave a class without having understood at least the basic concepts being taught that day.

The final question, of course, is whether English 011 is an effective adjunct course for English Composition. Perhaps this is the best place to record the students' criticisms. To begin with, some of them wanted and needed more individual help than we were able to give after class or during office hours. We tried engaging a tutor, an undergraduate working with the Head Start program, but few students took advantage of his help. The solution may be to expand the classes to three days a week, or bring in some qualified undergraduate tutors from the English Education program and offer them credit for attending the classes and tutoring designated students for a stated number of hours per week. But the main weakness of the course at present--and here again we agree with the students--is that the focus is entirely at the sentence level. It has become clear that if a grammar course is to complement the teaching of writing, that course must itself include frequent practice in writing. In other words, English 011 needs to be taught within the context of the composing process, and we feel that our efforts to provide this context will also add purpose to the units on spelling and vocabulary.

Nevertheless, we believe we have made some definite gains by creating English 011 and teaching it apart from the required composition sequence. First, this course places the emphasis squarely on grammar, spelling and usage skills. Seldom is there time for this kind of work in the remedial composition sections. Second, the programmed texts and the make-up system encourage students to assume responsibility for improving their language skills, so that those who keep their textbooks after the course is over have a much better chance of continuing to learn something from them. Finally, because English 011 requires no former study or knowledge beyond reasonable fluency in English, it constitutes a bridge between the general public and that separate world, the university; it is a necessary half-step which enables the disadvantaged student or the student who has been out of school to get a foothold in the university before taking on the challenge of university-level courses.